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The Da Vinci Code

A Roman Catholic Point of View (Editors note: There is also a recent publication, "The Da Vinci Hoax" by Carl Olson and Sandra Hiesel, available through Ignatius Press_tel 800.651.1531 www.davincihoax.com)

by Fr. Stephen Lynch, OFM

Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, has been on the fiction best-seller list of both the New York Times and Publishers Weekly for months, selling more than 7.2 million copies, and has been translated into more than 40 languages. Brown's novel has also made the Today Show and many other talk shows, as well as having inspired a one-hour ABC News Special, which focused on an alleged marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

The New Testament is clear that the 12 Apostles were all present at the historical Last Supper. Brown's focus is not the historical Last Supper, but rather Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, 1600 years after the historical event. Basically the story centers on the search for the Holy Grail, based on some clues disguised in Da Vinci's paintings. A key question in the book is this: Did Da Vinci paint the person sitting to the immediate right of Jesus as the face of a man or a woman? And that's where the code-breaking challenge begins. Brown's book proposes that this person in Da Vinci's Last Supper represents Mary Magdalene, not the apostle John. In doing so, Brown takes the spotlight off the men at the Last Supper, and focuses on the woman, Mary Magdalene. Brown has triggered a centuries-old urge to recapture the original Jesus Christ. The current blockbuster movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, also demonstrates people's fascination with Jesus Christ. Whether they feel negatively or positively about religion, people in American culture think about and care about spiritual realities. Brown's novel is capturing people's imagination because it is about ancient histories, code-breaking and secret societies. I have chosen to focus only on the ancient histories factor, because Brown challenges the roots of Christianity in terms of the divinity of Jesus Christ, and Jesus's relationship with Mary Magdalene. My Roman Catholic perspective centers on two points: Who is Jesus Christ? Who was Mary Magdalene?

Who is Jesus Christ?

Brown's fictional novel forces us to take a closer look at the origins of Christianity. He has enraged many who consider his novel anti-Christian heresy. However, Brown has people thinking about and reacting to Jesus Christ, and this provides a teachable moment. Relatively recent discovery of Gnostic gospels and texts include Nag Hammadi texts in Egypt in 1945, and the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1950. These offer views of the early Christian communities that differ from the canonical Gospels. Brown suggests that it is history's winners who get to write history. Of course, the abuse crisis in the contemporary church also raises questions about historical credibility.

The novel's greatest challenge strikes at the roots of Christianity by claiming that 1st and 2nd century Christians did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Rather, Brown claims that belief in Jesus' divinity appeared in the 4th century, not in the 1st century. Brown accuses traditional Christianity of fraudulently hiding this secret for centuries. The novel also suggests that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, and sired a royal Judeo-French bloodline that still exists - and that sinister Christians suppressed this. Some of Brown's plot comes from the 1982 book "Holy Blood, Holy Grail," which a New York Times reviewer called "rank nonsense." Both liberal and conservative critics agree the novel is a good read, but rife with errors, and often historically inaccurate. Brown often takes facts and gives them a spin that seriously distorts them. Brown's effort to redefine Christianity and the history of Christianity has confused many unfamiliar with Bible History. Such readers are vulnerable to the inaccuracies of Brown's point of view.

First, a look at the Christology of early Christian history. One of the tasks of 21st century scholars focuses on exploring how Christianity began by tracing its earliest texts. 1st and 2nd century Christians discussed and struggled with the question of who Jesus Christ really was. The original Christians comprised a Jewish sect who were practicing Jews, totally committed to monotheism. Because they believed in only one God, they found it difficult to believe that Jesus shared God's Divine Nature. They ultimately came to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, because they believed in Jesus's resurrection. In my opinion, Brown never really faces up to the most critical theological issue of all, which is the validity of the Resurrection. Jesus's resurrection so inspired belief in his divinity, that many Christians chose persecution, exile and martyrdom, rather than deny that belief.

Christianity quickly expanded to Greece, Rome and throughout the Middle East. Individual Christian groups struggled with diversity and conflict because there was an evolution in the awareness of who Jesus was. While there was a diversity of early expressions of Christianity in the first and second centuries, we see a clear movement from doctrinal confusion to doctrinal clarity. Most early Christians learned about Jesus from Oral Tradition, because they did not as yet have access to the written Gospels. Parts of the New Testament were in use from the second century. The Council of Nicaea approved the 27 books of the New Testament. And thanks to two biblical scholars, 4th century St. Athanasius (367) and 5th century St. Jerome, the 27 books of the New Testament became canonical.

There was an amazing early consensus of opinion regarding the essential elements of Christian faith, such as the Trinity of One God and Three Divine Persons, as well as the Incarnation, i.e. Jesus as a unique expression of the divinity. While some post-resurrection Christians still questioned Christ's divinity, the majority accepted Jesus as the Word of God in human form. Christians throughout the centuries believed and continue to believe that it is through Jesus Christ that we have a saving relationship with God.

In her thought-provoking book *Beyond Belief*, Dr. Elaine Pagels, currently an historian of religion at Princeton University, explores what Jesus meant to early Christians. She points out that it took several centuries before Christians formulated what they believed into creeds. Dr. Pagels concludes that the origins of this transition from scattered groups to a unified community have left few traces. Lack of early texts presents us with little incite about the early Christian

communities around the Middle East. Professor Pagels cites 3rd century Bishop Irenaeus (d. 220), as the leader of an important Christian group in provincial Gaul, as extolling John's Gospel. Irenaeus favored John because his gospel most clearly proclaims Christ's divine origin, and therefore represents a higher Christology. Irenaeus writes that even members of his own Christian community were splintered into various groups, some rivals or some even antagonistic to each other all claimed to be divinely inspired. The question was: who really was guided by the Holy Spirit, and who was not? So, around the end of the 2nd century, to combat Gnosticism and to unify rival groups of Christians, church leaders like Ignatius of Antioch, Justin the Martyr, Polycarp and Irenaeus, developed a set of instructional summaries of belief, termed the Rule of Faith, e.g. the Apostles Creed. By putting their teaching, worship, and discipline into fixed forms, Christians clearly affirmed their belief that Jesus Christ integrated within himself both a divine and a human nature.

Brown's novel suggests that the 4th century bishops at the Council of Nicaea wanted to consolidate their power base by creating a divine Christ and an infallible Scripture. The fact of the matter is the Council of Nicaea did not invent faith in Christ's divinity, because Jesus' divinity was already strongly attested to in the New Testament, and in early Oral Tradition. The newly converted Roman Emperor, Constantine, with the permission of the Pope, called bishops from around the then known world to an ecumenical council in Nicaea (modern-day Turkey). The council confronted the teaching of Arius, a 4th century Alexandrian theologian. Arius argued that Jesus Christ had undoubtedly been a remarkable leader sent from God, but could only be considered Son of God in a subordinate and inferior sense, but not of one substance with the Father. Dan Brown apparently adopts Arius as his representative for all pre-Nicene Christianity. The Council of Nicaea simply reaffirmed in more philosophical and theological terms the first century belief that Jesus Christ, the Divine Person, mysteriously linked two natures, divine and human. The council also approved the 2nd century grouping of 27 books that would become the New Testament canon.

What we believe about Jesus Christ is one thing; what we know about Jesus is something else. St. Hilary, a 4th century French bishop, and a renowned Doctor of the Church reminds us that God is mystery. Hilary suggests that while God's existence can be discovered by reason, God's nature, i.e. the Divine Source that lies at the Center of the Cosmic Mystery, can never be comprehended. Jesus's divinity must be accepted on faith, with the help of divine grace. The Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross publicly proclaimed his own faith-transformation when he testified, "Clearly, this was the Son of God." Mt. 28. 54 The integration of the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith means that Jesus is not only the messenger of the kingdom, but he himself is the message of God.

Jesuit Karl Rahner, one of the outstanding theologians at the Second Vatican Council, sums up Jesus Christ's role in the divine plan of Creation in these words: "Christ not only redeems humanity from sin, but brings to perfection the divine plan of creation."

And let us never forget, of all the nations in the world, the people of Israel play a pivotal role in salvation history. God's covenant with Israel stands as the indispensable context for the mission of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, that mission is unintelligible. Pope John Paul II affirms this when he says, "There is need for acknowledgement of the common roots linking Christianity and the

Jewish people, who are called by God to a covenant that remains irrevocable (Rom. 11.29). The pope goes on to say that, according to Christian belief, God's covenant has attained definitive fullness in Jesus Christ."

Who was Mary Magdalene?

With that, I would like to turn to a unique Jewish woman, Mary of Magdala (a town in Galilee). The biblical record and early legends about Mary of Magdala helps us understand the role of women in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Three decades ago, the Roman Catholic Church quietly admitted what critics had been saying for a long time: Mary Magdalene's standard image as a reformed prostitute is not supported by any New Testament texts.

As the Apostle of the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene played a crucial, perhaps irreplaceable role in Christianity's defining moment, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God chose one Mary for the birth of Jesus, and another Mary to announce Christ's Resurrection. In both these crucial aspects of Jesus' life, men were not in the picture ? only women, and these were Jewish women, just as Jesus was a Jewish carpenter.

According to Carl Jung, feminine values such as feeling, relatedness, intuition and the ability to soften raw power with love are feminine qualities everyone needs. Jung claims that a woman's feeling side develops differently than a man's, and her experience of relationship has many subtle nuances that men do not experience in the same way. As a result, Jung says that men often find their un-lived feminine side through women.

It is quite possible that Jesus got in touch with the feminine side of his humanity through women, and especially through someone like Mary Magdalene, or his friends Martha and Mary, to say nothing of his own mother. Jesus recruited and traveled with both male and female followers. The New Testament tells us that as a human being, Jesus grew in wisdom and knowledge. Jesus, too, needed to balance the masculine and the feminine within himself. And because Jesus did find that balance in his own life, he could use feminine qualities when he said of himself, "Learn of me for I am gentle and humble of heart Your souls will find rest in me. Mt. 11.29"

The biblical focus has largely been on what God has accomplished through the agency of men from Adam to the Apostles. Brown's novel has added new force to an already dynamic debate among women, who see Mary Magdalene's story as a parable for their own struggles to find their rightful place in the modern church.

While speculation that Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have married and had a child may appeal to the reader's imagination, it is without any biblical or historical basis. Dr. Karen King, a history professor at Harvard University's Divinity School, and one of the world's leading authorities on this subject, reaffirms that Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ never married for one thing, no text identifies them as man and wife. We know for certain that Mary Magdalene was the woman who three Gospels agree was the first witness to Christ's Resurrection, and the first to whom the Risen Christ appeared and spoke.

Professor Pagels makes the point that in first century Israel, women were not counted as legal

witnesses. She goes on to say that this fact makes Jesus' choice of Mary Magdalene, as the primary witness of his resurrection, even more remarkable. However, after telling the disciples what she had seen and heard, Mary Magdalene is never mentioned again in the New Testament. While Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus remains cloaked in mystery, she clearly exemplified a courageous leadership role as faithful disciple and apostle of the resurrection.

Jesus was birthed and reared by a woman, supported materially by women during his ministry, anointed by a woman in preparation for his Palm Sunday entry as Messiah into Jerusalem, surrounded by women in his suffering on the cross, and greeted first by a woman at his resurrection. All four gospels recount that it is a woman or women who at one stage or another anoint Jesus with precious ointment. In three instances, that anointing is the act that identifies Jesus ceremonially as the Christ (Anointed One). The woman who anointed Jesus on Palm Sunday prepared him to undertake his entry as Messiah-king into Jerusalem, his arrest and execution. So important did Jesus consider that ceremonial anointing that he insisted that wherever the gospel should be preached throughout the world, this sacramental anointing that the woman anointer had done only days before his death, would be told in her memory. In my opinion, to have a woman perform such an anointing is itself of enormous significance in defining Jesus' recognition of the truly sacramental role of women. Even popes have paid tribute to Mary Magdalene as the Apostle of Apostles.

All this strongly suggests that Jesus Christ treated women as intrinsic to his mission, and not only accepted their participation, but actively depended on it. Jesus may have walked in the company of men, but he shared some of his greatest revelations about his mission on earth with women. There is a great need in contemporary Christianity to rethink and reformulate from the ground up the role of women in the church. If a renewed world or kingdom of heaven is to become a reality, it must be done through the linked power of both genders, and the help of God's grace.

I would like to conclude this lecture by returning for a brief moment to the identity of Jesus Christ. Besides the historical evidence for belief in Christ's divinity, there is very touching liturgical evidence. An ancient Catholic Latin axiom teaches *lex orandi et lex credendi* (how we pray and what we believe are connected).

Professor Pagels points out that in the 2nd century, Pliny, an historian and Roman governor in Asia Minor, reported that two female Christian slaves confessed under torture that Christians met before dawn on a certain day of the week to sing a hymn to Jesus Christ as to a god. Pliny says that he had the slaves executed, because he believed their worship of Jesus Christ was an insult to the Roman gods.

In the 3rd century, the Christian scholar, Origen, writes that of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John insists that Jesus is not merely God's servant, but God's own light revealed in human form. In both the OT and NT, the concepts of divinity and light go together. The most ancient Vesper evening prayer of Christianity is called the Office of Light, or the *Lucernarium*. Christians sang this prayer as a liturgical witness to their belief in the divinity of the resurrected Jesus Christ, Light of the World.

At the end of the 3rd century, in the Armenian town of Sebaste, St. Athenogenes (305) with ten disciples were burned at the stake for confessing Jesus Christ as Son of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us. As soldiers ignited the fire, the martyrs sang this Lucernarium canticle. The text is from the Greek Phos Hilarion: "O gracious Light, pure brightness of the ever living Father in heaven, holy and blessed Jesus Christ." God calls all to go back to the beginning, to that luminous state of creation before the fall, where, as Messiah and Light of the World revealed in human form, the Incarnate Word of God is divinely appointed to rule the kingdom of God forever and ever.